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## **Soft Landings: Creating a Safe Place for Teachers to Take Risks while Learning**

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### **Abstract**

Leaders have a significant influence on student learning and are responsible for leading teacher professional learning in schools. While principals often lead teacher learning, others assist in this role. With the recent pandemic, it is clear there is a need for continued teacher learning. Extensive research on professional development has been conducted and is well known to be a strategy for improving teacher learning. While professional development offers short-term opportunities, a focus on professional learning in schools emphasizes sustained, ongoing experiences that engage teachers in inquiry around their practices. This mixed study explored the impact of sustained professional development. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted and analyzed. Documents were identified for quantitative analysis and then integrated with qualitative data. Findings showed the notion of soft landings, as referred to by participants, a culture where it was safe to risk and try to implement ideas they were learning. This culture was an important aspect of this sustained and ongoing experience for teachers. Key leadership practices nurturing the culture of soft landings were developing collective commitment, encouraging risk-taking, promoting collaboration, and providing individualized support. This study offers insights into how leadership can play a role in providing sustained experiences to create a school culture that nurtures teacher learning. This article holds significance to those leading teacher learning in schools and those interested in utilizing leadership practices that attend to building a culture of soft landings.

*Keywords:* teacher learning, soft landings, leadership, professional learning, professional development

### **Introduction**

This article highlights research from a study on sustained professional development (PD). This study aimed to explore the role of leaders in the provision of and facilitation of sustained PD. While principals play an important role in supporting teacher learning, including providing oversight to PD (Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Robinson, 2011), this role can be extended to other forms of leadership (Killion 2011; Neumerski, 2012). The research questions for this study were: *What are teachers' and leaders' perspectives about the sustained learning*

*experiences? What is the potential influence of leaders on the school culture?* The article begins with an overview of the literature on professional development and professional learning, leading teacher learning, and effective approaches to teacher learning. The article then outlines the methodology along with the results related to *soft landings*, a phrase used by participants in this study. Soft landings are defined as a school culture where it is safe for teachers to take risks and try to transfer what they learn into their teaching practices. A discussion of these findings follows and then finishes with conclusions related to leading teacher learning.

### **Professional Development and Professional Learning**

Professional development (PD) is a well-known and heavily researched topic and continues to be seen as an effective strategy for sustained teacher learning and influencing teaching practice (Campbell et al., 2016; Doucet et al., 2020; Guskey & Yoon, 2009; Killion & Hirsh, 2013; Timperley, 2011; 2015). Short term opportunities such as coaching, mentoring, and workshops are recognized as valuable (Brown et al., 2020; Guskey & Yoon, 2009; Showers, 1985; Showers & Joyce, 1996), but long-term and continuing learning opportunities are also recommended (Abrahams et al., 2014; Brown et al., 2020; Campbell et al., 2016; Fogarty & Pete, 2009; Fullan & Hargreaves, 2016; Guskey & Yoon, 2009; Joyce & Showers, 2002). Professional learning (PL) is viewed differently from PD and is described by Timperley (2011; 2015) as a sustained inquiry into practice that is often embedded into the school culture where teachers and administrators work collaboratively to improve student learning. Timperley (2011) argues PL is “an internal process in which individuals create professional knowledge through interaction with this information in a way that challenges previous assumptions and creates new meanings” (p. 5). Cooper et al. (2021) define PL as “a genuine concern for learning about and enhancing pedagogy through better alignment of teaching intents and learning outcomes” (p. 572). They contend PL emphasizes “working with” teachers rather than “doing

to”, which they suggest is highlighted in many PD approaches. Durksen et al. (2017) describe the difference between PD and PL by referring to PD as “activities that are arranged for teachers” (p. 53) and referring to PL experiences as those where teachers hold the responsibility for their learning. Fullan and Hargreaves (2016) argue there is value in both PD and PL. They suggest both individual and collective experiences for teachers and recommend collaborative professionalism, which they believe contributes to system success. With the recent pandemic and the challenges faced by teachers, the need for continued PD remains a clear issue but requires rethinking (Doucet et al., 2020). For the purposes of this paper, teacher learning will be used interchangeably with PD and PL to encompass the aspects of both.

### **Leading Teacher Learning in Schools**

School leadership is recognized for its influence on student learning and improving teaching practices (Davis et al., 2005; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Leithwood & Louis, 2012). School leaders play a significant role in leading teacher learning in schools (Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Robinson, 2011). This role is often extended to teacher leaders, outside experts, and/or third parties to facilitate teacher learning (Brown et al., 2020; Friesen & Brown, 2020; Killion, 2011, 2013; Supovitz et al. 2009; Yamazumi, 2008). Kaser and Halbert (2017) recommend that leaders should learn alongside teachers, so leaders at all levels are learning together. Campbell’s (2017) study showed teacher learning requires engaged and supportive leaders but also noted there are varying interpretations of what this looks like; supportive leaders can be perceived as either controlling or championing. Cooper et al. (2021) found teachers’ needs do not always line up with system needs. They argue that teacher learning should be linked to teachers’ perceived needs and working with teachers in response to these needs. Yet, leadership practices do contribute to sustaining teacher learning in schools and in fostering supportive conditions and culture (Campbell, 2017; King, 2011). Wiliam (2016) advocates for leadership practices that support teacher learning by finding ways to address

teacher needs and helping them focus on small changes first. Campbell's (2017) research on the state of professional learning in Canada showed that teachers reported different perceived needs, and varied approaches are needed to address the unique needs of teachers. "There is not, nor should there be, a 'one size fits all' approach to education in Canada. This variation is appropriate, professional, beneficial, and positive" (Campbell, 2017, p. 21). Moreover, leaders do play a role in leading teacher learning. Nevertheless, effective approaches are needed to address the varying needs of teachers and contexts.

### **Approaches for Teacher Learning**

Understanding what approaches are needed is important for school leaders interested in finding ways to support teacher learning. Active and experiential learning (Fogarty & Pete, 2009) is noted as one of the effective approaches for supporting adult learners (Merriam, 2008). Job-embedded inquiry (Kaser & Halbert, 2017; Timperley, 2011, 2015) offers active and experiential learning for teachers as they engage in ongoing cycles of inquiry into their teaching practices and their related impacts on student learning. Friesen and Jacobsen (2015) argue for design-based approaches that engage teachers in iterative learning processes to bridge theory and practice. Brown et al. (2020) used a design-based approach that engaged teachers as designers of learning by following a process of design-enactment-reflection; this approach helped teachers improve in professional practice competencies. Research also points to the value of linking student learning to PD to determine whether it is effective (Campbell et al., 2016; Friesen & Jacobsen, 2015; Guskey, 2012; Timperley, 2011). Fullan and Hargreaves (2016) argue schools invest in sustained and daily opportunities that cultivate a collaborative professionalism and include a combination of individual and collective learning experiences. Collaborative approaches are recognized as effective (Campbell, 2017; Kaser & Halbert, 2017; Timperley, 2011, 2015). Cooper et al. (2021), in their study on teacher professional learning needs, found that "professional learning opportunities are valued when a sense of trust and

working collaboratively is evident” (p. 573). Brown et al. (2020) reported that teachers developed confidence in their learning as they shared ideas and exchanged feedback with their colleagues, noting this was a “safe and supportive learning environment” (p. 8). Effective approaches also include variety and choice for teachers, and this may include a combination of short and long-term, on-site and off-site opportunities (Campbell, 2017) that address the varying levels of readiness and needs. Durksen et al. (2017) suggest teachers have access to a variety of experiences that support both individual and collective goals. Furthermore, teacher leaders need opportunities to learn how to lead collaboration in schools and develop collective responsibility; design-based approaches provide them with these learning experiences (Friesen & Brown, 2020). During the pandemic, teachers learned in multiple ways (e.g., professional learning communities, social media, webinars, expert support in schools, online), and most of this was job-embedded as they worked to navigate teaching during this crisis (Anderson et al., 2021; Doucet et al., 2020). Previous research highlights the importance of short-term coaching as an effective approach but indicated that longer or sustained experiences were even more beneficial (Showers, 1985; Showers & Joyce, 1996). Professional learning communities (PLCs) are also recognized in the literature as a means for teachers to engage in school improvement initiatives and problem-solving (Fogarty & Pete, 2009). PLCs offer teachers sustained opportunities to work collaboratively and share ideas (Battersby & Verdi, 2015). However, as with other approaches, PLCs require support from leaders in finding a common time and a place for teachers to meet as well as teachers who are willing to participate (Battersby & Verdi, 2015; Fogarty & Pete, 2009). Guskey (2014) argues teacher learning requires intentional planning along with a well-defined purpose. He recommends planning a backward approach and following these steps: “(1) student learning outcomes, (2) new practices to be implemented, (3) needed organizational support, (4) desired educator knowledge and skills, and (5) optimal professional learning activities” (Guskey, 2014, p. 13).

Understanding what approaches are effective is important for those leading teacher learning in schools, and there are several ways outlined above that illustrate this.

### **Method**

Mixed methods research design was used to explore the impact of sustained teacher learning in a public alternative school in Alberta, Canada. The alternative program in this study was based on a particular religion and teaching philosophy (Alberta Education, 2010) led by a formal society that provided oversight for teacher learning at the school. The school leadership team was comprised of members from the formal society and school administrators. At this school, teachers met weekly on Friday afternoons, and their learning was led by members of the formal society and supported by administrators. Direct teaching, workshops, and time for teacher collaboration were aspects of these afternoons. Teachers were tasked with designing learning experiences for students that aligned with the school's teaching vision. The research questions that guided this study were: *What are teachers' and leaders' perspectives about the sustained learning experiences? What is the potential influence of leaders on the school culture?* This article highlights one of the aspects of this sustained experience for teachers, the notion of soft landings, described by participants as a culture where it was safe to risk and try to transfer what they learned into the learning experiences they designed for students.

Ethics was obtained prior to recruiting participants for this study. There were 44 individuals who were invited to participate and represent the entire population at the school, which was comprised of teachers and members of the school leadership team. Mixed methods were used for data collection and included semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. The interviews took approximately 20–30 minutes, and the focus groups took approximately one hour. Interviews and focus groups included questions that asked participants to describe and give examples of the activities and experiences that were impacting their teaching practices and describing the perceived effectiveness of these activities. School

documents were also identified that contained quantitative data (e.g., descriptive statistics) to consider the potential influence of these sustained experiences on measures such as student learning and achievement outcomes, school improvement measures, high school completion rates and alignment to the school vision.

After the interviews and focus groups were transcribed, the transcripts were thematically analyzed using two rounds of coding to determine emerging themes (Miles et al., 2014). Inter-rater reliability was established by having another researcher review a round of coding to increase the level of confidence of emerging themes. The themes were then categorized, and the frequency of the themes was determined to quantify the data which supported the legitimation of the study (Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006). The descriptive statistics (quantitative data) identified during document analysis were then integrated with the qualitative findings from this study (Morgan, 2014). The integration and triangulation of the qualitative and quantitative data contributed to the trustworthiness and legitimation of the findings (Bazeley, 2018; Golafshani, 2003; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005). This article focuses on the findings related to the notion of soft landings. Other aspects of this mixed-methods study and the full doctoral dissertation can be accessed from the original publication (Thomas, 2016).

## **Results**

There were 35 participants who consented to be part of the study, including members of the school leadership team (n=6) and teachers (n=29). The response rate was 79.5% (35/44). There were 27 individual interviews conducted along with two focus groups with four participants in each. Documents were collected from the participants and analyzed (e.g., school jurisdiction evaluation reports, provincial survey data). The analysis of the interview, focus groups, and documents indicated that the sustained experiences were characterized by soft landings, a school culture with supportive conditions where it was safe for teachers to take risks and try implementing ideas they were learning. Leaders played a key role in establishing and

supporting this culture, and the following leadership practices were noted: (1) communicating a compelling vision to empower teachers, (2) encouraging risk-taking, (3) promoting collaboration, and (4) providing individualized support. The quotes provided in the following section represent a range of participant views.

### **Regularly Communicating the Vision**

One of the leadership practices integral to a culture of soft landings was that the leaders regularly communicated the school vision during the weekly Friday afternoon sessions. This sample quote from one of the leaders illustrates how the vision brought focus to these weekly sessions: *“[It’s] guided by a vision by leadership but it’s actually empowered by teachers to decide the priorities and the goals that they set in alignment to the vision.”* The leaders articulated the school’s vision during these sessions to encourage teachers to align their teaching practices: *“They know our culture; they know the vision of the school and they know the individuals that are on the receiving end. They can contextualize the PD.”* This vision served as a guide for teachers to see the big picture and be empowered by the leadership team to set goals:

*We seem to be given a lot of practical things that we can implement into our classrooms.*

*I also find the pep talks actually very helpful even if it is the same message, it still encourages me. It reminds me of why I’m doing what I’m doing.*

Both teachers and school leaders talked about the vision of the school and the common goal that everyone was working towards. Strong support for and understanding of the school vision and the collective commitment to school goals was also evident and contributed to developing a shared vision. A quote from a teacher reveals this support: *“I think our greatest success has been that everyone has been on board.”* Communicating the vision and developing a shared sense of responsibility for empowering teachers was a key aspect of the culture of soft landings.



## Encouraging Risk-Taking

Another leadership practice that helped establish soft landings was that leaders encouraged teachers to take risks in their learning. Leaders recognized and were not surprised that teachers were at different stages of readiness in their learning and the importance of encouraging the risk it required: “[You’ve] got to have a soft landing and teachers have got to know that risk-taking is alright”. There were varying levels of commitment noted by leaders: “[There’s a] different degree of willingness perhaps to do it with joy depending on how committed you are to the vision.” Leaders assured teachers of soft landings and encouraged teachers to take risks and to try as is evident in this quote: “There’s definitely a culture, in my opinion that makes it safe for people to try to do that. It’s, risk is rewarded, and you’re safe. The phrase soft landings and not having a culture of fear, I see that lived out.” Additionally, leadership also communicated that they did not expect everyone to be at the same stage in the journey, and a teacher quote highlights this: “The idea of soft landings and everybody’s at a different point and trying to drive out that fear.” At the same time, leaders were clear that teaching practices needed to align with the school’s vision and maintained high expectations to create coherence. One leader stated, “Aligning to practice is non-negotiable. We’re not going to be a school of scattered practices”, and a further quote illustrates this perspective again: “There is an expectation that all teachers will change their practice.” Most teachers found these expectations to be a positive pressure that motivated them to continue to grow in their teaching practice and contributed to their continued learning, as seen here: “It puts a good pressure on you to always be making good changes and looking at what needs to change instead of just still always doing things the same.” However, there were a few teachers who found these expectations overwhelming at times, as shown in this sample quote:

*I feel though there is quite a bit of pressure that can be placed at times, and I don't think it's intentional pressure, but I think as part of you know we are moving forward fast, it causes there to be a high level of anxiety involved in the process.*

Leaders supported risk-taking, which contributed to the culture of soft landings.

### **Promoting Collaboration**

Another feature of the culture of soft landings was how leaders promoted teacher collaboration. During the Friday sessions, there was time for collaboration after direct instruction or selected workshops, creating a space for teachers to be empowered to implement ideas. Leaders noted the value of time for collaboration as a key aspect of the weekly sessions and this was balanced with leaders providing guidance: *“[There is] a balance between someone giving you direction and how to work on your practice and time to actually think about what you would change in your own practice.”* Leaders believed in the value of collaboration: *“Collaborating says that we are stronger together”* and noted the time for collaboration was also important: *“They are bouncing ideas off each other. They are learning and growing together.”* Likewise, teachers also appreciated the time to collaborate with their colleagues: *“[It's] the joy factor of working with other people and them understanding what you're going through because they're going through the exact same thing.”* Teachers shared how collaboration supported their learning: *“You learn a lot from the other people that you're working with, so I always find that I take something away from those discussions.”* While collaboration was positively perceived by many of the participants, there were a few who talked about the difficulty of transferring what was learned to their classroom. However, working in a teaching team and having opportunities to collaborate helped teachers mitigate this challenge, and teachers pointed out what would happen if time was not provided: *“If it is not set aside time if it's left to us to figure out your own time to meet and implement it.”* Not surprisingly, teachers wanted more time to collaborate and recommended the weekly sessions should include

more time to work with their colleagues. They discussed the tension of balancing their other teaching tasks with this:

*I just wish I had more time to do the research, the planning, and everything that I will need to do in order to make that happen, which is very hard to do when you have so many other things happening at the same time.*

Leaders offered a different perspective. They suggested more time did not necessarily equate to teachers aligning their teaching practices to the school vision and that some teachers might view using this time differently to deal with urgent tasks: *“I’m just going to sort of tie up a few loose ends here and get some marking done or get some planning done.”* Promoting collaboration was a key leadership practice and aspect of the culture of soft landings.

### **Providing Individualized Support**

In addition to collaboration time being provided for teachers to work with their colleagues, teachers were offered individualized support. Leaders reported that this support allowed teachers and leaders to meet *“together to clarify or to help work through that process of building those things that we have done a training session on.”* Leaders shared how the availability of leaders to meet with teachers on-site, brainstorm ideas, and give feedback on how they were implementing ideas was helpful in their professional learning. Teachers spoke of the value of having this individualized support on-site: *“Having that access to them and being able to come one-on-one is amazing.”* However, there were some teachers who did not access this individualized support. The proximity of the leader’s office to some teachers’ classrooms was seen as a barrier to them getting individualized support, as well as the lack of time during the day to access this. Leaders offered a different reason why teachers might not be accessing this support, suggesting some teachers might not be comfortable asking for help or meeting one-on-one. They also noted that once teachers got over the initial hurdle of asking for support, they recognized the benefits: *“Once people actually go in there and they actually*

*have some experience going in there they can see that it's a really positive and rich time with the people who are there really to help you."*

While attending the Friday sessions was mandatory, the school leaders were responsive to teachers need for choice and individualized support by providing optional workshops: "*They have the option to attend if they feel they need more instruction on that particular concept that we've touched on that day.*" Teachers appreciated being given a choice for optional workshops:

*I think that's good when you have a choice because if it's something you need you can attend and get that knowledge, or if it's something you know and have the knowledge you can just work on applying it to your own practice.*

Providing individualized support was another leadership practice related to the notion of soft landings and sustained teacher learning in the school.

## **Discussion**

The objective of this study was to explore leaders' and teachers' perspectives on sustained learning experiences that teachers were part of at an alternative school. Key leadership practices for nurturing a culture of soft landings emerged from the findings, and in this section, these practices will be discussed: (a) develop collective commitment; (b) encourage risk; (c) promote collaboration; and (d) provide individualized support.

### **Develop Collective Commitment**

Leaders in this study revisited the school's vision during weekly sessions to foster collective commitment and supported teachers in making connections between the school's vision and their teaching practices. This leadership practice contributed to developing a shared vision. Teachers aligned their goals to the school's vision and then worked towards meeting those goals, although at times, this was overwhelming for teachers. The role of leadership in developing a shared vision and collective commitment resonates within the literature (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Moolenaar & Slegers, 2015;

Robinson, 2011). Moolenaar and Slegers (2015) refer to this leadership practice as vision building, whereas Leithwood and Louis (2012) describe this core practice as setting directions. Robinson (2011) argues for linking student learning to goal setting to help teachers align vision with their current teaching practices. Teacher learning should include starting with goals and then planning backwards to be effective (Guskey, 2014). Campbell et al. (2016) points out the need for a balance between teacher voice and system coherence but noted that this is complex. A possible way to mitigate this complexity is through collective leadership approaches (Harris, 2011) where vision and goals can be developed collaboratively. Additionally, Cooper et al. (2021) recommend leaders work *with* teachers rather than doing *to*, which serves as a caution and recommendation for leadership overseeing or facilitating teacher learning. Developing a shared vision by supporting teachers in making connections between their learning and the school's vision contributes to a culture of soft landings.

### **Encourage Risk-Taking**

In this study, teachers were encouraged to take risks. Leaders recognized teachers were at different levels in their learning and believed it was important to support them in taking these risks. Building trust and creating conditions where teachers feel comfortable to take risks relate to Cooper et al. (2021). In their study they found that teachers valued their professional learning when there was evidence of both trust and collaboration. Timperley's (2011, 2015) research also connects here as it emphasizes active and experiential learning where teachers engage in the ongoing inquiry into their teaching practices. This inquiry supports opportunities for teachers to take risks as they can test their ideas out while they work collaboratively. Wiliam (2016) suggests leaders help teachers to take small steps in their learning. In this way, small steps are the conditions leaders can create that may encourage teachers to take small risks. Understanding teachers are at different stages in their learning and possess different needs affirms Campbell et al.'s (2016) recommendation for teachers to have access to a variety of

experiences and that there is not a one size fits all approach. When teachers are provided with supportive conditions and varied experiences, they are comfortable taking risks, and this contributes to a culture of soft landings.

### **Promote Collaboration**

Leadership promoted collaboration in this study and scheduled time for teachers to work and learn together. Fullan and Hargreaves (2016) argue for sustained collaborative experiences stating, “autonomy and collective work must co-exist. One strengthens the other” (p. 13). Campbell et al. (2016) note that, both in the literature that informed their study and the results of their study, collaborative learning experiences were valued by teachers, and having these sustained experiences was also important. The idea of working collaboratively was also recommended by Cooper et al. (2021). Moreover, there are several approaches that promote collaboration, including, but not limited, to PLCs, coaching, mentoring, online webinars, and workshops (Battersby & Verdi, 2015; Brown et al., 2021; Fogarty & Pete, 2009; Joyce & Showers, 2002). Moreover, teachers benefit from developing interdependent relationships and learning with their peers (Willms et al., 2009). Campbell et al. (2016) spoke of the value of sustained and job-embedded experiences but recognized that external learning opportunities could also be helpful for teachers. Cranston’s (2016) study where three urban sites engaged in collaborative inquiry noted that creating a collaborative culture takes time. Their study showed that one size does not fit all, and leaders play a key role in creating the conditions and structures to encourage collaboration. Durksen et al. (2017) examined motivation and collaboration and suggest a framework for teacher learning that offers teachers a range of learning experiences. This includes a combination of what they refer to as personal/independent and mandated as well as collaborative learning opportunities. Friesen and Jacobsen (2015) recommend teachers engage in a deeper iterative learning process to help them make connections between theory and practice while working collaboratively with their peers. Furthermore, leaders should go

beyond creating opportunities for teachers to collaborate and be actively engaged themselves in collaborating with and learning alongside teachers (Campbell et al., 2016; Kaser & Halbert, 2017). Promoting collaboration is another leadership practice nurturing a culture of soft landings.

### **Provide Individualized Support**

Individualized support was offered to teachers to bring clarity and help teachers make sense of what they were learning, and teachers were also given choices to meet their individual learning goals and needs. Leading teacher learning requires addressing teacher needs and working with teachers to support their learning (Cooper et al., 2021). There is not one approach that will meet the needs of all teachers, and those leading teacher learning should offer varied experiences to reflect the diverse teacher needs and their contexts (Campbell et al., 2016). Coaching and mentoring are well known for offering individualized support and are even more beneficial if sustained over the longer term (Joyce & Showers, 2002; Showers & Joyce, 1996). Furthermore, leaders should seek to embed time in teacher schedules for sustained and continuing experiences where individuals have access to immediate support and feedback while they are learning (Fogarty & Pete, 2009). Providing this individualized support fosters a culture of soft landings.

### **Limitations**

Although the findings from this study revealed leadership practices for nurturing a culture of soft landings, it is important to recognize that there were limitations. A limitation of this study was that it involved one school and only one school jurisdiction, which leads to low generalizability in the findings. However, the leadership practices identified in the study could be applied to other contexts. For example, leaders in different contexts will be able to see the value of collaboration in teacher learning in fostering a culture of soft landings where teachers are more comfortable with taking risks and testing their ideas with their peers. Further study is

merited to explore the notion of soft landings in other contexts and more schools and to find out if there are other leadership practices creating a safe space for teachers to take risks in their learning.

### **Conclusion**

Leadership practices can foster a culture of soft landings, a safe space where teachers can take risks while learning. Four key leadership practices emerged from the findings for nurturing a culture of soft landings: (a) develop collective commitment; (b) encourage risk; (c) promote collaboration; and (d) provide individualized support. This study can inform school leaders seeking to facilitate teacher learning and foster a culture characterized by soft landings. The findings could also benefit those interested in finding varied approaches for leading teacher learning and the potential of third parties in leading teacher learning. More research is needed to explore the notion of soft landings and associated leadership practices in multiple contexts. Additional research is also merited to find out how leaders can work with teachers to better support their unique needs and balance both collective and individual needs.

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